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A Composer Composed

—Acts of Divine Composition in George Herbert's Poetry—

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1

JESU is in my heart, his sacred name
Is deeply carved there; but th'other week
A great affliction broke the little frame,
Ev'n all to pieces: which I went to seek
And first I found the corner, where was *J*,
After, where *ES*, and next where *U* was graved.
When I had got these parcels, instantly
I sat me down to spell them, and perceived
That to my broken heart, he was *I ease you*,
And to my whole is *JESU*.

The short poem quoted above, titled 'JESU,' is written by a seventeenth-century Christian poet, George Herbert(1593-1633). On the surface this poem, like not a few others by the same poet, may strike its readers as too simple, even naively so. In the seventeenth century when Herbert wrote this poem, there was not yet a clear distinction between the two alphabets J and I. So, playing on this orthographical loophole, the speaker can argue that his Lord JESU or IESU does exactly what His name signifies: I ES U, that is he(='I') eases(='ES') me(='U'). A rather jejune poem, is it not?

Actually, it is not. On the contrary, it contains an interesting insight into the psychology of literary composition. If we read the poem once again, we notice that it begins with the breaking into pieces, through some 'great affliction' [l.3], not only of a heart but

also of a word, and ends with the moment when both the broken word and the broken heart have been made 'whole' [1.10] or become composed (i.e. put together) again. Doesn't this suggest that the act of composition, of putting letters into a word, is somehow related to the composing of one's self, to the process of achieving inner stability? As far as this short poem is concerned, that seems to be the experience of the speaker, for he finds JESU or IESU to be his Easer (or ESer, he might like to claim) when he sits down and 'spell [s]' (make out, decipher) [1.8] the separated letters. The collecting of his self is achieved simultaneously with the putting together of letters into a word—or words into a sentence, and sentences into a completed and coherent poem, for that matter.

In fact, such overlapping between spiritual and literary composition, or between the ordering of a soul and the ordering of his verse, is a marked feature not only of 'JESU' but also of many other poems by Herbert, and it is that overlap which this essay would like to explore. It seems to be the belief of the Christian speaker in Herbert's poetry that only when he is composed and harmonised in spirit can he compose a harmonious song of praise; and as if to respond to this faith of his, in not a few of Herbert's poems God is seen to intervene, sometimes overtly and sometimes covertly, to harmonize the speaker's verse as well as his heart. The human composer, in the act of literary composition, has both his soul and his lines composed by what we may call the divine Composer. In the pages to follow, I would like to analyse how this double composition of the composer is taking place, through a reading of selected poems by Herbert.

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As is pointed out by critics, dramatic reversals at the very end characterize many of Herbert's poems and these reversals often involve the conversion of their speaker.*¹ In such poems the speaker keeps protesting to God and expresses dissatisfaction with serving his Lord,

but in the last few lines he turns back from his complaints and humbly renews his allegiance. The fuming speaker is, as it were, coaxed and composed into obedience, before either we readers or he himself realizes it. For example, the disgruntled speaker in 'Affliction(1)' is heard in the final lines of the poem to break into this vow: 'Ah, my dear God, though I am clean forgot/Let me not love thee, if I love thee not' [ll.65-66]. This sounds all the more dramatic, considering the fact that only a moment ago he was threatening to 'go seek/Some other master out' [ll.63-64]. A similar example is found in 'The Cross,' too: its speaker, frustrated because '...things sort not to my will,/Ev'n when my will doth study thy renown' [ll.19-20], complains of his sense of physical and moral barrenness even in his priestly vocation, yet we hear the poem concluded with this humble prayer: 'And yet since these thy contradictions/Are properly a cross felt by thy Son,/ With but four words, my words, *Thy will be done*' [ll.34-36]. We may also note that here the speaker is literally making the Son's words his own: *Thy will be done*, besides being one of the supplications in the Lord's Prayer, are in fact the words of Christ in Gethsemane, immediately before His passion: 'O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, *thy will be done*' (Matthew 26:42, italics mine).^{*2}

In some cases it is not only the fuming speaker but the entire poem that is composed into serene order. When the will of a poet is fiercely in rage, so will be the verse he writes, but both are dramatically tamed and tuned into harmony in 'The Collar'.

I struck the board, and cried, 'No more.

I will abroad.

What? shall I ever sigh and pine?

My lines and life are free; free as the road,

Loose as the wind, as large as store.

Shall I be still in suit?

Have I no harvest but a thorn

To let me blood, and not restore
What I have lost with cordial fruit?

Sure there was wine
Before my sighs did dry it: there was corn
Before my tears did drown it.

Is the year only lost to me?
Have I no bays to crown it?
No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted?

All wasted?
Not so, my heart: but there is fruit,
And thou hast hands.

Recover all thy sigh-blown age
On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute
Of what is fit, and not. Forsake thy cage,
Thy rope of sands,

Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee
Good cable, to enforce and draw
And be thy law,

While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.
Away; take heed:
I will abroad.

Call in thy death's head there: tie up thy fears.
He that forbears
To suit and serve his need,
Deserves his load.

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child*:
And I replied, *My Lord*.

In the first thirty-two lines of the poem there hardly seems any pattern in the speaker's language: lines seem to be of different lengths and there appear to be no recognizable rhyme-schemes. But just when

the revolt reaches its fiercest, the divine Word intervenes, and in the concluding quatrain we find not only the rebelling speaker responding to his Lord's call but also his irregular lines brought miraculously backed into harmony. The four lines can be neatly divided into two clauses of fourteen syllables, the first line rhyming with the third (*wild/child*) and the second line with the fourth (*word/Lord*). In this way the moment the raging speaker is composed back into sense and obedience, his poem, too, is composed and tuned back into harmony.

Yet this act of composition, surprising as it may seem, is, a well-prepared one. 'My lines and life are free' vaunts the revolting speaker[1.4] and so they seem at our first reading, but as far as his poetical 'lines' are concerned, they are not so 'free' as he claims them to be. As Joseph Summers rightly points out, no line is unrhymed, even in the first thirty-two lines where the speaker rages and raves; and each line is of the same length (two, three, four or five feet) at least as one of the four lines where the final 'composition' takes place.*³ Surely God as the Composer moves in a mysterious way. Even while His child 'gr[ows] more fierce/And wild' [11.33-34], the pen in His hand is quietly at work, towards the final composition of 'lines' as well as of 'life.'

It is, in fact, not only His pen that is secretly working to bring about the final resolution. If only we listen for it, we don't have to wait until line 35 to hear the Composer's voice. To be sure, 'Not so, my heart' in line 17 is usually taken as the speaker's own utterance, intended to add fuel to the already burning fire of his rebellion, but can't we instead, as Ilona Bell and others do, hear it as the Lord's whisper seeking to obtain His child's 'heart'? *⁴ If so, the lines that follow [11.18-26] can be read as God's attempt to talk the speaker out of rebellion, trying to make him aware of the folly of breaking tie with his Maker. The 'cage' [1.21], He seems to be admonishing, is of the speaker's own making, a product of his own solipsistic 'petty thoughts' [1.23], and the hedonistic principle he is holding fast to as his 'good cable' [1.24] is in fact as unreliable as a 'rope of sands'

[1.22]. Isn't it time to open up his eye of faith rather than to 'wink' [1.26] through his willful obstinacy, as well as to reach out for the cup of salvation ('fruit' [1.18]) to recover his spiritual health? *⁵ All this counsel for return to faith may be drowned in the rage of the speaker, yet the voice of the Father is certainly there, if only in a barely audible whisper.

Last but not least, the words used to revile God by the speaker are actually words composed by none other than Him whom he rebels at. At the height of his rage, the rebel is heard to blurt out: 'He that forbears/To suit and serve his need/Deserves his load' [11.30-32]. These words may have been intended by the speaker as a provocative parting shot to his Lord, but they are in fact *His* words, only distorted: for we can hear in them an echo of the following words of Jesus: 'Take my yoke upon you and learn of me...and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matthew 11, 29-30). So, at least in terms of language, the speaker cannot claim to be his own man, depending as he does for his vow of independence on those words prepared by his Master. Or we may argue that as the ultimate Composer and Giver of language, God proves so generous as to provide a text for His rebel, letting him abuse it and distort it for his own blasphemous purpose.

'The Collar' is often seen as a typical example of Herbertian turn-arounds, as it features the last-minute conversion of its revolting speaker. But what is more significant if perhaps less dramatic is the presence, throughout the thirty-six lines, of the divine Composer, working to 'compose' and bring back into order not only His child but also his verse. The real Author of 'The Collar' may in fact be God, who redeems into order the troubled poem as well as its troubled author.

In 'The Collar' we have seen the restoration of orderly language taking place simultaneously with the restoration of orderly mind. This kind of correspondence between poetical and spiritual composition—or at times *dis*composition—occurs not infrequently in Herbert's poetry. A good example is 'Home'. After complaining for the preceding twelve stanzas about his Lord's absence, the desperate speaker in the last stanza abandons the so-far regular ABABCC rhyme, as if to aurally prove his claim that he has lost both 'rhyme and reason' [l.75].

Come dearest Lord, pass not this holy season,
 My flesh and bones and joints do pray:
 And ev'n my verse, when by the rhyme and reason
 The word is, *Stay*, says ever *Come*.
 O show thyself to me,
 Or take me up to thee! [ll.73-78]

The rhyme here is somewhat irregular ABAB'CC. This subtle departure from the norm mirrors well the restlessness of the speaker, vexed by the delay in the supposed Advent of his dear Savior Jesus:

'Denial' is another case in point. As in 'Home' the speaker feels alienated, because his prayer doesn't seem to get any hearing from his Maker. This sense of alienation puts not only his mind but also his verse into disharmony, as he himself admits at the outset of the poem.

When my devotions could not pierce
 Thy silent ears;
 Then was my heart broken, as was my verse;
 My breast was full of tears
 And disorder. [ll.1-5]

The verse is indeed 'broken' [1.3], at least in the final two lines quoted. Contrary to our expectation, they do not rhyme, as if to aurally embody the loss of spiritual composure suffered by the speaker. If his soul lies '[u]ntuned, unstrung' [1.22], so do the lines he writes, and this remains the case throughout the poem's first five stanzas.

In the last stanza of the poem, however, a reversal takes place. Just when the speaker offers one more painful plea, rhyme is restored, rather painlessly, in the very last lines of the poem. God at last seems to have chosen to 'defer no time' [1.28] in responding to the request of the speaker and moved to tune into harmony both the speaker's 'breast' [1.26] and 'rhyme' [1.30].

O cheer and tune my heartless breast,
Defer no time;
That so thy favours granting my request,
They and my mind may chime,
And mend my rhyme. [11.26-30]

Here the speaker's prayer can be found doubly answered—in the composition of his verse as well as in the composure of his heart.

In some of Herbert's poems, this divine act of composition, spiritual and verbal, happens in a more direct, audible manner. We can actually hear Him provide lines for a troubled poem and become its co-composer, at the same time he rescues the poet's self out of trouble. This is exactly what takes place in 'Jordan(II)', for example. Spurred by the 'lustre' [1.2] of 'heavenly joys' [1.1], its speaker vows to use his utmost art to praise God, but in spite of this holy ambition or perhaps because of it, he has fallen instead into the trap of self-glorification: he has come to revel less in his Lord's glory than in the glories of his own verbal endeavour—'quaint words and trim invention' [1.3], as he puts them—and ended up in 'weav[ing] [him] self into the sense' [1.14] This means that the speaker has lost his

necessary humility and composure as a believer, swallowed as he is in the sheer energy of his creative 'bustle'[l.15], but then a voice comes in to bring him back to his senses. The 'whisper'[l.16] of a 'friend'[l.15], identifiable as that of Christ as in some other poems by Herbert, good-humouredly yet no less authoritatively advises him against adhering to his creative self.*⁶

As flames do work and wind, when they ascend,
So did I weave myself into the sense.
But while I bustled, I might hear a friend
Whisper, *How wide is all this long pretence!*
There is in love a sweetness ready penned:
Copy out only that, and save expense. [ll.13-18]

The over-zeal of the speaker is certainly calmed to rest, now that he is urged to let go of his 'pretence' [l.16] and to 'copy' [l.18] instead that text in love prepared ('ready penned' [l.17]) by none other than Himself. Thus gently yet effectively, this divine 'friend' deflates the speaker's inflated literary ego and composes the speaker's self back into health. Moreover, as in 'The Collar' or in 'Denial,' not only the speaker but also his poem is composed and brought back on track. If we read the final three lines again, we notice the advice itself forms a text 'ready penned' [l.17] for an immediate use and, 'cop[ied]' [l.18] by the speaker, literally becomes the concluding lines of the poem. So, as far as this part of the poem is concerned, it is not so much the speaker as his friend Christ who can claim to have 'penned' or composed it. The Redeemer here redeems not only the self-absorbed speaker but also his poem back into order, by giving it a decent closure otherwise unavailable to the poet.

To see one more example of such divine intervention that brings about simultaneous composition of soul and of verse, let us now turn to 'A True Hymn'. Its speaker confesses that he can hardly think of any phrase in praise of God other than a scriptural formula 'My joy,

my life, my crown' [1.5], but he also expresses his faith that He will make up that verbal deficiency. The virtue of a poem, as he sees it, is in the sincerity of feelings expressed, in whether 'the soul unto the lines accords' [1.10], and as long as that condition is met he believes that a poet may leave it up to God to 'supply the want' [1.18] in literary decorum. And indeed, as if to answer this faith, God as the ultimate Composer is heard to enter the poem, bringing into perfection the speaker's somewhat tongue-tied piece of work.

Whereas if th' heart be moved
Although the verse be somewhat scant,
God doth supply the want.
As when th' heart says (sighing to be approved)
O, could I love! and stops: God writeth, *Loved*. [11.15-20]

Again it is God, not the speaker, who brings the stumbled poem into a handsome closure. In response to the elliptical cry *O, could I love!* [1.20], He responds '*Loved*' [1.20], so that this single but powerful divine Word concludes the poem. Thus, as far as this last line is concerned, it is God that is its author or composer. In addition, as we also see happening in 'Jordan(II),' the redemption of the 'heart' is taking place along with that of the 'verse.' By signing '*Loved*' (i.e. 'You loved me'), God is in effect acknowledging the faith of the speaker, who, not quite sure of the sufficiency of his own piety, has sighed in the subjunctive *O could I love!* If in 'Jordan(II)' God deflates the over-ambitious speaker back into his proper size, here He is seen to relieve and encourage the over-diffident speaker into assurance and confidence.

This acknowledgement from God is in itself a blessing to the speaker, who has been 'sighing' to be approved of his faith [1.19], but in fact he has good reason to believe he is doubly blessed in this one-word response. *Loved* is primarily the past tense of the verb, *to love*, yet of course it can be taken as the past participle and mean

'You are loved by me. I love you.' In this latter interpretation God can be seen not only acknowledging but also reciprocating the love first shown by the speaker. So, assured of being loved by Him who acknowledges his love, the speaker as a believer must be greatly relieved and surely finds spiritual composure. The 'want' in his heart, the desire for God's love, is amply 'supplied' and met, at the same time he has his 'want' in poetics made up and gets his poem brought to a decent closure.

From these readings of 'Jordan(II)' and 'A True Hymn', we can argue that the act of writing poetry is for Herbert an occasion to experience double composition: to have his restless self composed and healed back into health, at the same time he has his poetical lines composed and brought into harmony by the divine Composer. As he suggests in another poem 'The Quiddity,' to write in praise of God is to be with God and to experience healing fellowship with Him: 'It(=poetry) is that which while I use/I am with thee, and *most take all*' ['The Quiddity,' ll.11-12]. For Herbert the practice of poetical composition may virtually be a redemptive experience, in which he experienced the redemption of his soul as well as the redemption of his language.

4

'There is in love a sweetness ready penned:/Copy out only that, and save expense': this is the advice that the divine 'friend' gives to the speaker in the concluding lines of 'Jordan(II).' What, then, is that 'sweetness ready penned'? In Herbert's poetry, it is God's love for mankind, especially as shown in the Son's Passion. To the Christian poet, the divine Author who helps him compose and complete his poem is, before anything else, the Author of his salvation, and the text of this saving covenant, carved not on 'tables of stone' (Exodus 31:18) but on 'fleshy tables of heart' (2 Corinthians 3:3), was written in His blood spilled on the Cross.

This is the biblical basis Herbert stands on in imagining God as the ultimate Composer (i.e. Writer), and the image of crucified Christ as the Writer of the New Covenant appears not infrequently in his poems. '[H]ow then shall I imitate thee, and/Copy thy fair, though bloody hand?' wonders the speaker in 'The Thanksgiving' [ll.15-16], awed by the enormity of Christ's sacrifice in the Covenant signed by His 'bloody' hand. Similarly, in 'Obedience,' its speaker muses on the irrejectability of His offer of redemption: 'Thy sorrows were in earnest, no faint proffer, /Or superficial offer/Of what we might not take, or be withstood' [ll.28-30]. In the eye of the Christian poet-speaker, the Passion can be seen as the most quintessential act of the divine Composer. In redeeming through His sacrifice the souls of his believers, He can claim to compose them, that is, to free them from the rage of sin; and at the same time He has composed(i.e. written) and provided for His poets a text they can 'copy' or imitate, both in spirit and in letters.

If the Passion of the Son, followed by His resurrection, is believed to redeem man from sin, it may also be believed to redeem his poetry as well. This belief finds its best expression in a two-part poem titled 'Easter'. The first part of the poem is written in terms that have both musical and theological associations.

Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
Without delays,
 Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
With him mayst rise:
 That, as his death calcined thee to dust,
 His life may make thee gold, and much more just.

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
With all thy art.
 The cross taught all wood to resound his name,
Who bore the same.

His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
Is best to celebrate this most high day.

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song

Pleasant and long:

Or since all music is but three parts vied

And multiplied;

O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,

And make up our defects with his sweet art. [11.1-18]

Here is a statement of the speaker's faith that Christ crucified and then risen is the foundation for his action, both spiritual and musical. If the speaker can rise and rejoice at all, it is because the risen Son has taken his heart 'by hand' [1.3], and similarly it is thanks to His stretched hands or 'sinews' [1.11] that he now knows how to 'resound [H]is name' [1.9]. As he believes it, not only has his Saviour released him from the rage of sin but He has provided him with the music he can play to celebrate Easter, and that music is composed none other than through His own sufferings on the Cross.

If we notice the double meanings in some key terms here, we may argue that the risen Son has provided His followers not only with the music but also with devices on which to play that music: 'wood' is used in line 9 to mean musical instruments made of wood, but the word can refer to the Cross on which the Son was hanged. Conversely, 'sinews' in line 11 means tendons of crucified Jesus, but it can mean cords or strings in lutes, violins and so on. Thus the Cross borne by Christ may well be made into the echoing board of the lute the speaker is stroking, and His sinews may well have provided 'strings' [1.11] for it. This conceit of Christ Himself being a musical instrument, as Rosemond Tuve reminds us, is mediaeval in origin and not quite original to Herbert, yet it is nonetheless refreshingly effective in presenting the Son as the ultimate Inventor of music.*⁷

We may remember that in 'A true Hymn' God 'doth supply the

want'['A true Hymn', 1.18] of its speaker, both poetically and spiritually, by responding to his plea with His divine Word. The speaker in 'Easter,' too, prays for a similar intervention or participation by God. Speaking in terms of the musical triad that is, as is rightly noted by critics, emblematic of the holy trinity, he claims that the third 'part' [1.17] is necessary other than the two parts already humanly borne—by 'heart' [1.1] and by 'lute' [1.7], respectively—since all good music, to sound harmonious, must be 'three parts vied' [1.15]; and he goes on to invoke the aid of the 'blessed Spirit' [1.17], the third Person of the Trinity.*⁸ Thus, having provided the speaker both with the music and the instrument it is to be played upon, God is asked in addition to provide His help in its performance. The purpose is to 'make up defects' [1.18] in the piety('heart') as well in the artistry ('lute') of the speaker, so that the music he will play may sound worthily harmonious.

The unworthiness in his 'heart' and 'lute' thus both being overcome with the 'sweet art' of the Holy Spirit, the speaker is now ready to play a hymn proper to celebrate the 'most high day' [1.12] in church calendar. The second part of 'Easter' becomes that 'song/ Pleasant and long' referred to in the first part[1.13-14]. It is, appropriately, 'three parts vied' [1.15] or composed of three regular stanzas, in iambic tetrameter.

I got me flowers to straw thy way;
 I got me boughs off many a tree:
 But thou was up by break of day,
 And brought'st thy sweets along with thee.

The Sun arising in the East,
 Though he give light, and th'East perfume;
 If they should offer to contest
 With thy arising, they presume.

Can there be any day but this,
 Though many suns to shine endeavour?
 We count three hundred, but we miss:
 There is but one, and that one ever. [11.19-30]

If the lines sound awkwardly childlike, it is in keeping with the claim they are making. The speaker has prepared 'flowers' [1.19] and 'boughs' [1.20] to deck his Lord's path, but He in fact has risen ahead of him ('up by break of day' [1.21]) and brought 'sweets' [1.22] (fragrant herbs and flowers) Himself. So the necessary decoration—ostensibly in 'flowers' [1.19] but by extension in words and in music—has been provided in advance by none other than the One he has meant to praise, as if in response to his earlier invocation of the divine Spirit. Moreover, it would be an act of 'presum[ption]' [1.26] to suggest through over-artistry (as the speaker in 'Jordan(II)' regrets he has done) that he can eclipse the glory of the risen Son, which outshines the 'Sun' in the East with all its light and perfume. There is 'but [O]ne, and that [O]ne ever' [1.30] who alone enables the resurrection—of souls as well as of music, and to honour the real Composer of the song he is singing, the singer thinks it only appropriate to sing in childlike simplicity and deference.

For any poet, to live is to write: and if he is a Christian poet, to write is to praise Christ, always to sing in His honour. To him there is a sense that without the redemption of his soul first he would not be able to sing at all and that the Son's Passion is the event that enables him to compose not only his heart but also his verse. Christ crucified and then risen is to him the ultimate Composer, musically as well as spiritually. Herbert's 'Easter' is a poetical statement of this belief, in language that is itself musical.

hand in hand with the composing of poetical lines. If the self of the speaker is in trouble, so is his verse, and it is God that intervenes to mend this disorder, both spiritual and poetical. In 'The Collar' what seems to be totally chaotic verse is brought into order the moment the rebelling speaker is brought back into obedience. This act of composition looks at first dramatic, but it is in fact achieved through the 'still, small voice' of God (1 Kings 19:12) whispered even during the height of the speaker's rage. In 'Jordan(II)' and 'A True Hymn' this divine intervention happens in a more direct, audible manner. God proves Himself as a co-author of the speaker's poems and in so doing 'suppl[ies]' the want' ['A True Hymn,' l. 18] in poetics—and in faith, to boot. Yet this divine Author who helps His followers compose poetical lines is, first of all, the Author of their salvation, and His original act of composition is found, as is explicated in 'Easter,' in His Passion. 'The cross taught all wood to resound his name, / Who bore the same' ['Easter,' ll. 9-10]. In authoring, through His own blood, the New Covenant that is meant to free His believers from sin, God can be said to have composed the text in *agape*, which they can 'copy' in spirit and in letters.

Since having both his soul and verse composed and brought into order is a key experience for the speaker in Herbert's poetry, it may not be inappropriate to close this essay with a reading of one more poem in which such double 'composition' is taking place. Indeed, its speaker is not only brought into composure but, assured of his spiritual rebirth, commits himself to inviting others to experience a similar renewal. The poem is 'Aaron.' Aaron, the brother of Moses, is the great high priest of the Israelites and as such the archetype for Christian priests to come. Being 'dressed' and being 'tuned,' according to Amy Charles, are two of Herbert's favourite figures for being in order or well prepared, and in this poem both of these two figures are used to impress on us the spiritual transformation experienced by the speaker.*⁹

Holiness on the head,
Light and perfections on the breast,
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead
To lead them unto life and rest.
Thus are true Aarons dressed.

Profaneness in my head,
Defects and darkness in my breast,
A noise of passions ringing me for dead
Unto a place where is no rest.
Poor priest thus am I dressed.

Only another head
I have, another heart and breast,
Another music, making live not dead,
Without whom I could have no rest:
In him I am well dressed.

Christ is my only head,
My alone only heart and breast,
My only music, striking me ev'n dead;
That to the old man I may rest,
And be in him new dressed.

So holy in my head,
Perfect and light in my dear breast,
My doctrine tuned by Christ (who is not dead,
But lives in me while I do rest),
Come people; Aaron's dressed.

In the first stanza the speaker talks of 'outer' dressing as an ideal priest, with allusions to a lengthy description of the Aaronic garb in the Old Testament(Exodus, Ch.28), but then, as Helen Vendler and

other readers notice, he moves to speak more of 'inner' clothing, how he is dressed in, not on, his head or breast, in a manner that echoes Paul in his Epistles when he talks of renewal in Christ (e.g. Galatians 3:27, Romans 13:14, Ephesians 4:24, Colossians 3:9-10).^{*10} Although at first he feels he is not properly 'dressed' or innerly prepared as a 'true Aaron' [l.10], the speaker is now assured of his adequacy as a priest, through the imputed perfection of Jesus, the high priest in the New Testament who has chosen to sacrifice Himself (Hebrews 4:14). Now that Christ is his 'only head/[H]is alone only heart and breast' [ll.16-17], he has, as it were, 'put on Christ' and that is why the speaker can confidently welcome his flock as His vicar.

But perhaps more interesting for our discussion here is the other of Herbert's favourite figures used here: that of music and tuning. As in 'Denial' or in 'Home,' God in 'Aaron' too is presented as the speaker's Tuner, who resolves the speaker's inner cacophony (cf. 'a noise of passions' [l.8]) into the restful harmony that is symbolized by 'harmonious bells' borne by Aaron [l.3]. To the speaker, Christ is his 'only music' [l.18], who has 'tuned' [l.23] his doctrine and without whom he 'could have no rest' [l.14]. Thus, both the ill of the soul borne by the speaker and the cure provided by his Saviour are referred to in musical terms, impressing on us once again the link between inner and outer harmony, between spiritual and musical/poetical order.

Moreover, as we have already seen in other poems by Herbert, God is not only *mentioned* as the Tuner or Composer of heart but seen *practicing* His art of tuning and composition. The five rhyme words (*head, breast, dead, rest, dressed*) remain unchanged throughout the five stanzas, aurally suggesting the rest and constancy imputed to the restlessly brittle speaker. In addition, as one annotator shrewdly points out, the entire poem is composed on the number five, supposed to be the perfect number: each stanza consists of five lines, with the third and longest line having five stresses, and the title 'Aaron' consists of five letters.^{*11} The Tuner Christ, in addition to having

tuned the speaker's 'doctrine' [l.23], seems to have helped tune his poetical lines into harmony, with the hope that this poetical harmony may seep inside and cure His priest's inner discord from outside.

And judging from the concluding line of the poem, we find His musical or poetical therapy has produced a wonderful effect in His patient: in a sign of spiritual composure made possible through poetical composition, the speaker is now enabled to repeat Christ's words of invitation to rest for his own congregation. As Jesus said to his followers, 'Come unto me, all ye labour,... and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28), so the priest-speaker now can say: 'Come people; Aaron's dressed' [l.25]. This is a great departure from the speaker in 'The Collar,' who we remember in the height of his rage uses and distorts the verses right after that to justify his rebellion.*¹² As Vendler rightly comments, the speaker is now both himself and Christ, and he is also Aaron, the type of the true priest.*¹³ Truly, it is no longer the 'poor priest' [l.10] in the speaker but Christ in him that speaks.

So, as we have seen happening in 'The Collar' or 'Jordan(II),' the restive speaker in 'Aaron' has both his heart and his poem composed into harmonious rest; but here the speaker in his renewed self goes a step further: he can now speak the words of his Tuner and, imitating and figuring Him as a worthy priest, commits himself to the task of inviting others to a similar spiritual renewal. Led by this Herbertian poet-cum-priest who is 'tuned' and 'dressed' as a 'true Aaron' [l.5], it is now the turn for his flock to experience 'life and rest' [l.4]. Or it may even be for *us* his readers' turn to have *our* minds composed, in the act of reading his lines, which have been co-composed by his divine Composer.

Notes

Parts of this essay (Sections 2 and 3) originally appeared in somewhat different forms in 'Some Elements of Surprise in the Poetry

of George Herbert' (in Japanese. Included in *Bulletin of Toyo Gakuen University*, vol.4, pp. 25-43 [Nagareyama, 1996] and in 'Words and the Word: Time and Eternity in George Herbert's Religious Lyrics' (in *Bulletin of Toyo Gakuen University*, vol.6, pp.103-117 [Nagareyama, 1998])). In re-considering such poems as 'The Collar,' 'Jordan (II),' and 'A True Hymn' I hope I have been able to point more clearly to the connection between writing and healing, or between composing and composure, that can be found in these poems.

All citations to Herbert's works are to *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991). All quotations from the Bible are from the Authorized (King James) Version.

- *1 For example, see Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), p.25.
- *2 Chana Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p.43.
- *3 Joseph Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), p.92.
- *4 Ilona Bell, 'The Double Pleasures of Herbert's "Collar" in *Too Rich to Clothe the Sunne: Essays on George Herbert*, eds., Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), pp.80-82. I would also like to note that Dr Takeshi Saito offers the same reading in 'Dan-to-so-no-ippa' (in Japanese. 'The School of Donne') in *Saito-Takeshi-Chosaku-shu* (Takeshi Saito's *Collected Studies and Essays*) [Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1975], vol.4, p.241.
- *5 For Eucharistic symbolism in 'The Collar' there is a detailed discussion in Jeffery Hart, 'Herbert's *The Collar Re-read*' in *Boston University Studies of English*, vol.5 (1961), pp.65-73; reprinted in *Essential Articles: George Herbert*, ed., John R. Roberts (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1979), pp.453-460.
- *6 The Christ-like 'friend' appears, for example, in 'The Holdfast' and 'Love Unknown,' too. Stanley Fish goes so far as to say that the word 'friend' is 'Herbert's special word for Christ'. Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p.198
- *7 Rosemond Tuve, *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp.144-145. McColley adds that the poem 'may be a hieroglyph of its metaphor for poesie, the lute, since its eighteen lines suggest the strings of a nine-course lute.' Diane McColley, *Poetry*

and Music in Seventeenth-Century England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.161

*8 For example, see Helen Wilcox, 'George Herbert', in Thomas Corns, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to English Poetry: Donne to Marvell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.186. Or McColley, *Poetry and Music in Seventeenth Century England*, p.160.

*9 Amy Charles, 'George Herbert: Priest, Poet, Musician' in *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America*, vol.4 (1967) pp.27-36; reprinted in Roberts, *Essential Articles: George Herbert*, p.251.

*10 Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert*, p.119. See also Tobin's note to the poem in *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems*, p.410.

*11 Tobin, ed., *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems*, p.409.

*12 See my discussion above, p.6.

*13 Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert*, p.121